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April 19, 2002

**DEFENDANT CONVICTED IN COCAINE IMPORTATION TRIAL**

TAMPA - Luis Albeiro Lopez-Ramirez, 45, of Buenaventura, Colombia was convicted today in Tampa Federal Court of conspiring to import in excess of five kilograms of cocaine. The jury returned its verdict after deliberating less than three hours. The Honorable Susan C. Bucklew set sentencing for July 19, 2002. The defendant faces a minimum mandatory term of ten years' imprisonment and a maximum sentence of life.

\_\_\_\_\_Mr. Lopez-Ramirez was apprehended in international waters on August 3, 2001 aboard a Colombian vessel, Barlovento II. Ten Colombians aboard another vessel, the Recuerdo, were also arrested and nine tons of cocaine were seized on board the Recuerdo. Both vessels were more than 1200 miles from their home port of Buenaventura, Colombia and within thirty miles of each other when apprehended. Testimony presented at the four day trial established that the defendant was the captain of the Barlovento II, which was serving as a decoy or lookout for the Recuerdo. Both Mr. Lopez-Ramirez and the Recuerdo crew, along with the cocaine, were taken to the United States Naval Base in Mayport, Florida in a joint operation by the United States Navy and United States Coast Guard. Four members of the crew of the Recuerdo have pleaded guilty and a trial date for other crew members is set for May 20, 2002. The arrests and seizure were part of the ongoing investigation in the Middle District of Florida by the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, Panama Express.

Federal agencies participating in the investigation and prosecution of Luis Albeiro Lopez-Ramirez were; the United States Coast Guard (USCG); the Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF); the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); United States Customs Service (USCS); and the United States Marshal Service (USMS).

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Joseph K. Ruddy of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force in the Middle District of Florida.